

John F. Kennedy used the slogan, "Would you buy a used car from this man?" on posters knocking Richard Nixon in his victorious 1960 presidential campaign.

But what if you had bought a car — new or used — from your Congressman?

This cycle there are four Republicans who own large car dealerships running in higher-profile Congressional races.

On one hand, these candidates generally enjoy the benefits of wealth and local television notoriety in their districts. But there's also a downside, considering some of the current controversies in the automobile industry — highlighted just this week by the Toyota recall hearings.

"On the whole, it's a great proving ground for people to be in public life," said Rep. Bill Shuster (R-Pa.), a former dealership owner. "You're dealing with customers. You're convincing people to buy things, you're convincing people to vote for you. Your name usually is out there in the public, especially if your dealership is named after you. You get an opportunity to be on television and do commercials."

But it's often hard to shake the stereotypical image of a used car dealer in a bad plaid sports coat just trying to make a deal — or get a vote.

"Obviously people try to say the derogatory things, used car salesman, things like that," Shuster said. "When in reality if you go into every community in America, the local automobile dealer, the new car dealer especially, they're the pillars in the community."

Shuster owned and managed his family's dealership for more than 10 years until he sold his stake after being elected to Congress in 2000. But he isn't the only House Member who has cut deals on a brand new or used motor vehicle. Over the past decade, four Republicans who have served in the chamber have previously owned dealerships: Shuster owned Shuster Chrysler;

former Rep. Don Sherwood (Pa.) owned several dealerships in his district; Rep. Vern Buchanan (Fla.) invested in car dealerships and **Rep. John Campbell (Calif.) was president of a car dealership**. Alabama Gov. Bob Riley (R), who left Congress when he was elected governor in 2002, was also a car dealer.

In addition to current Toyota recall hearings, last year's Cash for Clunkers program and federal bailouts of General Motors and Chrysler have provided plenty of controversy in the auto industry recently.

Of the three candidates interviewed, for example, all of them said they were either unsure or would not have voted for the Clunkers program. But dealerships owned by Scott Rigell in Virginia's 2nd district, Mike Kelly in Pennsylvania's 3rd district and Tom Ganley in Ohio's 13th district all participated in the trade-in discount program last fall.

Rigell, who owns Ford, Lincoln Mercury and Volvo dealerships, is one of a few Republicans vying to challenge freshman Rep. Glenn Nye (D-Va.). He said his dealerships participated in the program because his competition would have had the edge otherwise.

"We would have essentially been out of business the entire time," Rigell said. "I had no ethical problem whatsoever. I have a duty to the people who have worked with me for five, 10, 25 years."

Kelly, one of several Republicans running in Pennsylvania's 3rd district, said his dealership also participated in the Cash for Clunkers program.

"From a selfish standpoint, it helped us sell cars," Kelly said. "But from a national standpoint, it begs the question: Was this money well-spent?"

Speaking of money well-spent, all of these car dealers are likely to get a boost on the campaign trail from the years worth of local television advertisements featuring their name or their company. As it happens, all four of the Republican candidates bring wealth and high name identification to the race.

Rigell and his wife have branded their dealership with their own names — and even their home phone number — during its 17 years of existence. Until recently, Rigell estimates his dealership spent \$25,000 to \$30,000 in advertising per month for his dealerships and sold more than 110,000 cars.

Kelly said he spends an estimated \$50,000 per month on advertising for “Mike Kelly Auto,” plus he’s already put \$25,000 of his own funds into his campaign. Kelly added he’s willing to go into the “six-figure range” to self-fund his bid.

Ganley estimates he is on television 12 to 15 times per day in the area around Ohio’s 13th district — and that was before he was running for Congress. Ganley, who owns 32 car dealership across 16 locations in northern Ohio, announced earlier this month he was switching from the open Senate race to challenge Rep. Betty Sutton (D) instead.

Like Kelly and Rigell, Ganley also boasts an edge in finances and fame: He already gave \$1.3 million to his abandoned Senate bid, and he said in a phone interview that he would be willing to spend up to \$7 million on his House campaign if necessary.

According to a Public Opinion Strategies poll released by his campaign, Ganley has 62 percent name recognition out of 400 likely voters in the district.

A fourth Republican car dealer, businessman Jim Renacci (R), a co-owner of the Renacci-Doraty Chevrolet dealership in Wadsworth, Ohio, is challenging freshman Rep. John Boccieri (D). Renacci did not return a request for an interview.

“And the nice thing about auto dealers is that just about everybody buys a car at one time or another,” said Nathan Wurtzel, a GOP fundraiser and strategist, who consulted both Sherwood and Shuster.

Wurtzel said not only are car dealers well-known in their areas, but they are also heavily

involved in their communities. What's more, most of them are Republicans because they typically own businesses of 50 or 100 employees — a nice profile that appeals to many Republican donors.

In fact, Wurtzel has bought three cars from Sherwood's dealerships.

"I could have never told you that I'd buy three Chevrolets in a row," he said. "What makes them good politicians is that they're good listeners. They have an understanding of what people want."